

Khosanitis

Robin Wilkinson

The Khosanitis virus comes on quickly, like a hooker in a Thai go-go bar. It's spread by travellers and, so far, is incurable.



Imagine you're on a seventeen-hour journey perched upon the rattling roof rack of a Soviet-era school bus. The road has more potholes than your relationship history and you've rarely eaten so much sand in your life. You rest on your backpack for comfort, but you're clutching the rails with one hand and your stomach with the other, as the driver, loaded to the pupils on Red Bull and nicotine, swerves to avoid cows and cars, pedestrians and porcine. You grip hard, dodge the frequent branches that try to sweep you off the bus and pray to whatever local gods they worship around here for safe passage.

Despite the discomfort you think to yourself: this is living. Actually,

the discomfort heightens the living. You're a hard-ass mofo who deliberately packed their bag so the sharp edges would protrude into their spine and make the journey that little bit rougher. Because that's what Indiana Jones would do.

Yeah, don't deny it; you know what I am talking about. You wouldn't be riding this bus in the middle of goddamn nowhere if you hadn't once dreamed of outrunning boulders, dodging pygmies' darts and looting ancient treasures. You know: adventure! There's a little Doctor Jones inside every backpacker trying to get out.

Bone-jarred, you arrive at your destination, check in, and proceed to take a stroll. Meandering through the old town's narrow, chaotic streets you are lost within five minutes.

During your aimless peregrination you become the guest of honour at a local wedding, taste street food that may pop up again to visit for the next week or so and become an inducted devotee of an ancient religion that numbers only two other followers in the world.

You ask some friendly locals for directions back to your guesthouse. They don't speak English and you suspect they are laughing at you. It's all good-natured fun and after a comic sequence of mimes you are back on track.

You're lost again several minutes later so you follow your nose. The aromas of food, spices and incense are deliriously enticing.

Best of all, you are yet to see another foreigner.

This is adventure, you think. You are Indiana Jones, Richard Burton and Lara Croft rolled into one über-backpacker of awesomeness.

Suddenly, you round a corner and see a conga-line of bars, restaurants, souvenir stalls and internet cafes stretching off into the distance. Young and beautiful people fresh out of puberty are drinking

cheap booze from buckets and falling into one another. Trashy pop songs jostle for volume. Local boys are chatting up the foreign girls and the foreign boys are hitting on what they believe are the local girls.

You have just stumbled into the local backpacker ghetto and it has a raging case of Khosanitis.



First discovered in Kho San Road in Thailand, Khosanitis is fast becoming a global pandemic. It is also known as Backpackers' Disease.

Take a location anywhere in the world; for convenience we'll call it the Host. Its way of life has been preserved mostly intact for centuries. People there still ply basic trades and live simple, uncluttered lives. The staple diet has not changed in generations nor have the music, culture or customs. Modern conveniences are few.

Importantly, the Host usually possesses one distinguishing feature: a mountain, a lake, a festival, an ancient temple or three, or just lax mores and cheap drugs.

Along comes a traveller—a vector of Khosanitis, who falls in love with the Host's bucolic charms. At some point the traveller departs but reveals the Host's location to another, who passes it on to someone else and so forth. You've all seen *The Beach*; you know how these viral memes spread. Khosanitis has entered the larval stage.

Even if it takes some years before the backpackers begin arriving, once they do it is in droves; like lice to dreadlocks.

The first symptom of Khosanitis is an eruption of hives or 'Guest Houses'. The hives compete with each other for limited nutrients, turning toxic and structurally dangerous. The hives give the Host

constipation; its antiquated sewerage system becomes clogged by the mass flushing of too much toilet paper.

Meanwhile the bed bugs are laughing. They've never had it so good. They're sucking blood in gallons, as are the various touts, dealers and con men.

'Hello, hello, I give you tour! I take you special temple, good shop! Hashish? Opium? Girls! Girls! Boys! Boys! Whatever you want.'

Having left their good sense back home - sitting on the mantle alongside their decorum - the backpackers repeatedly fall for scams so obvious your blind grandmother could see through them.

The secondary stages of infection appear alongside the growing influx of travellers.

Once the locals ate grains and unleavened breads, now it's banana pancakes, pizza and freshly brewed coffee. If there's any of that weird ethnic food around it's watered down for palates that can't handle too much flavour in a meal. They call it fusion cuisine.

Before anyone can say, 'Happy Hour', English, Irish and Australian pubs have erupted like boils, all within lancing distance of each other.

Finally, the Host enters its death throes, which begin with the hordes of other organisms that come to feed: package tourists in air-conditioned buses organised in military fashion and the nouveau rich in bigger, sleeker buses.

Street stalls shoot up their parasitic ivy, spooring pathogens like the ubiquitous fishermen's pants that have become the ethnic costume de rigueur for global nomads. Tie-dyed tops and low-quality pashminas get a look in also. Hagglng turns into an extreme sport:

Khosanitis

‘Two dollar. I give you local price.’

It’s always local price. Whatever it is and for however much, one only ever pays the local price.

‘One dollar.’

‘Two dollar. Local price, I make no money. Business is bad.’

‘Business is bad all the time. One dollar.’

‘Okay, one dollar fifty. I have family.’

‘I know what it’s worth. One dollar.’

You’re a ruthless negotiator and you drive a hard-bargain: one dollar twenty-five; three minutes wage for you and half of the day’s average wage for the vendor. But it’s the principle that counts. Khosanitis always comes at a bargain price.

Eventually, the Host is completely overwhelmed and resembles every other backpacker ghetto in the world, from Lima to Luang Prabang.

There is no known cure for Khosanitis except for abstinence, and where’s the fun in that?

A certain level of Khosanitis is inevitable. It’s just that as travellers we have become so predictable in our wants and needs that we have altered the face of backpacking from adventure to venture.

Travellers have the explorer bug. We want to be the first to discover that secret destination that no Western eyes have ever seen before. What usually happens though, is that we stumble along the tourist trail from one location to another, led not by a sense of adventure and wonderment but by the highlights page of our Lonely Planets. The locals realise this and cater to our every whim. In short, we let ourselves become stereotypes.

But before you jump up to torch your guidebooks, remember that we must also shoulder some of the blame for travelling like the living dead.

We need to change the way we travel to ameliorate the effects of Khosanitis. It is time to go back to the beginning and work out why it is we want to travel. Is travel about visiting other countries, passively seeing new places and ticking off the boxes? Or is it about challenge, immersion and dodging darts fired by blowgun-wielding pygmies?

One aspect of travel that often gets forgotten is that it teaches you to adapt to unfamiliar situations and minor crises without breaking a sweat. It provides insight into other cultures. It's about engaging with the world and becoming an intelligent global citizen.

At the same time, travel is also about as close as you can get to being completely lost in a world where everything is now connected. How difficult is it to vanish off the map in the twenty-first century? There is a certain freedom in this sort of travel, but that doesn't mean freedom from responsibility, taste or discrimination. In fact, it is the opposite; travel should hone these qualities.

It's time we started putting more conscious effort into the philosophy of backpacking, eschewing the predictable and introducing creativity, freedom and spontaneity.

Instead of being extras in someone else's adventure, it is high time we become the heroes of our own.